

We need to get our facts straight

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Food security is crucial for the survival of any country. Political, economic and social stability is jeopardised if food security is brought to the precipice. Starvation, death, and disorder follow. Governments, therefore, need to attach topmost priority to food security.

Bangladesh witnessed melt-down of food security many times before liberation of the country. Soon after liberation, the country was hit by a catastrophic famine in 1974. The death toll released officially was 27,000: the actual figure was reportedly much higher. Despite a good harvest in 1973-74 food security collapsed and people suffered terribly.

Food production was around 10 million tons, while the population was 75 million in 1971-72. There was no food crisis and people were well-fed, by and large. The crisis started in 1973, though there was no crop failure that year or in the preceding one. The situation turned precipitous in 1974-75, a period marked by excessive rains and floods.

Cereal crop loss due to rains and floods and the actual requirement of food were not worked out precisely. Food aid was inadequate, or import under food aid program could not be effected. We still do not know what precisely was the food gap during that catastrophe.

More than three decades have elapsed since then, but we are still working in a cavalier fashion with our food statistics. There is lot of noise with figures relating to production, consumption and import requirement of cereal crops. The Ministry of Agriculture compiles district-wise production figures of cereal crops. If we go by their statistics, the country is at least self-sufficient in food, if not in surplus. So where does the deficit come from? Either the production figure is wrong or the presumed consumption per capita is misconceived, or the presumption of 10% seed, feed and wastage (SFW), is far from reality.

There has not been any study on any of these

areas, and no attempt has been made to reconcile the figures released by different ministries and agencies. We are still groping in the dark, as we have been since liberation.

Lack of rigour has restrained Bangladesh's effort to reach a decent level of perfection in areas where it is a desideratum for survival. Information collection and processing on food security is clearly identified as such an area.

Consumption per capita needs to be determined reliably, through an empirical survey using a large representative sample. Per capita food consumption has for too long been worked out on the basis of casual empiricism or impressionistic assertion. The figure has been revised upward from time to time based on impressionistic observation, though the actual figure may be far from the assumed figure.

In this context, we may draw an example from the structure of the sugar market in the country. A couple of decades back, the country's sugar consumption was barely 200-300,000 tons a year. Incredible as it may sound, the figure has shot up to 1.2 million tons — a figure that appears to be highly counter-intuitive. As a result, the country has to import about a million tons of sugar a year.

The use of urea also registered sharp rise during the last decade; it is about 2.6 million tons a year. The country has to import about one million tons of urea to meet the local demand, because it is now being used in fishery, animal husbandry, and in the industrial sector. It is likely that cereal crops also have diversified uses, which has spurred a sharp rise in demand.

The output of cereal crops needs to be more reliably estimated by improving the quality of data. The methodology of the survey has to be agreed upon by an expert group, and data has to be collected by persons trained for the purpose.

Marketable surplus has to be separated from the total output. The producers might hide information in this regard, but an astutely

designed questionnaire may resolve the problem to an acceptable level of satisfaction. One can only surmise that with increased per capita income and improved quality of life, producers earmark a much higher portion of their produce for consumption and for emergencies.

The result: marketable surplus might not have increased *pari passu* with increase in production. We, therefore, do not see a high flow of food grains in the market. Our estimate of SFW at 10% of the output has to be revised. 1% increase in SFW means diversion of 275,000 tons from the production basket. Disinformation on this count also has serious implications for food security planning.

The production figures need to be subjected to intensive scrutiny for validation. Production of wheat has plummeted, crowded out by other crops. Rice production has not increased as was expected a few years back.

One should not be surprised if it is found that paddy land is being used for other crops. Production of some non-traditional farm products and fruits has markedly increased. These are high value-added crops, and farmers are switching over from low value-added crops to those. This is inevitable in an emerging economy.

Instead of obfuscating the problem of real food shortage through disinformation and lame excuses, we should carry out a rigorous

empirical study on farm production, including food crops, fruits and flowers to ascertain where we actually stand.

If the increase in the production of other crops has come at the cost of food crops, appropriate action will be needed to adjust to this transition. Other crops may not only have taken land from the food crops, they might also have taken the entrepreneurial resources of the more able farmers, leaving them to work on a neglected land. If that be true, we have to first see the pattern of crop diversification and decide about the appropriate mix of crops.

It is said that statistics are like a bikini: what they reveal is suggestive, but what they conceal is vital. Our statistics should not hide the vital aspects of food security. All plans and projections will go astray if we do not construct them on a solid foundation of quality statistics. We will only enter the trapdoor to perpetual uncertainty and see our plans upended more frequently than we can sustain if we elect to deceive ourselves with sub-standard statistics. Lack of correct information and insidious disinformation must not be allowed to frustrate the country's food security plan.

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